



Testimony of Frank Calzón

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Subcommittee on Human Rights and Wellness

Committee on Government Reform

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Congressman Dan Burton, Chairman

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Chairman Burton, thank you for the opportunity to appear before the Subcommittee today. I appear on behalf of the Center for a Free Cuba, a nonpartisan, nonprofit, independent human rights organization. I am glad to testify before Chairman Burton, a hero to Cuban Americans and to Cubans on the island. I am also pleased to appear before Congresswoman Watson, whose experience as an ambassador provides an important dimension to her work in Congress.

The Cuban people had great expectations of the 1959 revolution, but instead they endured a totalitarian regime based on denial of human rights and the destruction of civil society for over 40 years.

Fidel Castro's regime has done everything possible to keep Cuba under total political paralysis, but the Cuban people continue to struggle to regain the political and economic space denied to them by the dictatorship. Cuba today is not the Cuba of ten years ago, indeed is not the Cuba of one year ago. Cubans, taking heed of Pope John Paul II's advice, began to act despite repression and fear.

On May, 2002 in accordance with Cuba's socialist constitution, Oswaldo Payá turned in more than 11,000 petitions asking for a plebiscite on democratic change to Cuba's National Assembly. Payá's initiative, the Varela Project, was endorsed in an unprecedented Cuban TV broadcast by President Jimmy Carter. Payá was honored by the European Parliament and met with world leaders including Secretary of State Colin Powell.

Castro responded by declaring Cuban socialism “irrevocable and untouchable.” The regime sentenced 75 independent journalists, independent librarians and human rights activists in summary proceedings (about 40 of them were Varela Project activists). Most sentences ranged between 15 to 25 years. The dictator also executed three Cubans who hijacked a ferry, without injuring anyone.

The world took notice. The European Union called for the immediate release of the dissidents. Sweden called the developments “unacceptable.” Germany, France, and Canada, among others, spoke out. The AFL-CIO condemned the arrests of labor leaders; the Inter-American Press Association called for the released of detained journalists, the *Los Angeles Times* reported, “After years of calling for the lifting of sanctions against Cuba, now we must ask U.S. policy makers to step on the brakes.” Nobel Laureate Jose Saramago, a long time supporter of the revolution, said the executions “had robbed him of illusions and this is as far as I go.” *The Washington Post* reported that perhaps this is not the time to soften pressure on the Cuban government and Uruguay’s Chamber of Deputies condemned Havana’s repression.

Granma, Cuba’s official newspaper, called Peru, Uruguay and Chile “miserable puppets and a paradigm of abject treason.” *Granma* called Uruguay’s president “a robot at the service of imperialism” and both countries severed diplomatic ties.

Havana said *The New York Times* “is neither serious nor liberal.” A Spanish TV reporter was beaten by Cuban embassy staff at a demonstration before the Cuban embassy in Paris. Ninety percent of Spaniards, according to a survey, believe Fidel Castro should leave power. More than 200 Czechs demonstrated before Castro’s embassy in Prague.

Castro called Spanish President Jose Maria Aznar “a little fuher with a little mustache.” He called Italian Prime Minister Berlusconi, “Benito,” and President Bush “a barracuda, an animal to which one should never turn his back.”

Castro withdrew Cuba’s request for admission into the Cotonou Agreement with the European Union, which provides tariff benefits to third world countries. The regime closed Spain’s cultural center in Havana, and rejected European humanitarian assistance due to the Europeans’ continued reference to human rights.

The European Union said it would reduce contacts with Cuban government officials and increase ties with Cuba’s internal opposition. Germany withdrew from Havana’s book fair and Holland from Cuba’s biennial art festival. Greece has yet to decide whether to grant Castro a visa to attend the 2004 Olympic Games in Athens. Meanwhile, Washington said Cuba, Burma and North Korea have failed to take steps to stop “human trafficking.” In March 2002, the Protection Project at Johns Hopkins University reported that “reports further indicate that Canadian and American tourists have contributed to a sharp increase in child prostitution and in the exploitation of women in Cuba.”

If in the political sphere the regime is going through some rough times, its economic performance is not better. Castro closed one half of Cuba’s sugar mills, a Mexican bank, Bancomext, (owed more than \$400 million) froze Cuban assets in Europe. The most recent official figures available (for 2001), as reported by *Reuters*, indicate direct foreign investment “plummeted to \$39.8 million in 2001 from \$488 million a year before.”

Castro is simply broke, and as Secretary Powell has said, Havana pays some imports with the money it owes others. Several of Castro's most important trading partners have suspended credits and export insurance. Yet, like the second to last scene in a bad Hollywood western, some are out trying to muster a cavalry to save his regime. This time, it is a cavalry of American tourists and special interests whose objectives will only strengthen the Western Hemisphere's most enduring dictatorship.

The question remains, what can the United States do? I answer that question with thirteen modest proposals:

One: Do no harm. At a time of a widespread international awakening about the nature of Castro's regime and the failure of the policies of engagement and business as usual, American tourist dollars, U.S. credits and export insurance would be, as President Bush has said, "foreign assistance in disguise."

Let there be no confusion. American companies can sell food and medicine on a cash and carry basis. What is at issue is not U.S. sales to Cuba, but asking the U.S. taxpayer to replace the lost Soviet subsidies. If Washington could not rescue Enron, why rescue a bankrupt, cruel, and hostile regime 90 miles from Florida? Many governments are confronting Castro's insolvency. On January 4, 2003, John Turley-Ewart wrote in Toronto's *National Post*:

"While tourist brochures tout Cuba as a vacation paradise of sandy beaches, the Castro government has refused to pay millions of dollars it owes to Canadian companies and Canadian taxpayers have subsidized further millions in foreign aid that has done little to alleviate the country's desperate poverty."

Two: Listen to the suggestions of former presidents Vaclav Havel (Czech Republic), Arpad Goncz (Hungary), and Lech Walesa (Poland) “to put aside transatlantic disputes about the embargo on Cuba and to concentrate on direct support for Cuban dissidents, prisoners of conscience and their families.” (*The Washington Post*, September 18, 2003)

Three: Be cautious about the implementation of U.S. policy. As Theresa Bond has written in *Castro’s Crackdown*, a recent article in *Foreign Affairs* “in other totalitarian states, from Burma to Zimbabwe, American and other diplomats provide similar assistance to local dissidents, but they do it much more covertly—so discreetly, in fact, that the programs rarely reach the public eye.”

Four: Members of Congress and their staff should continue to pressure the regime, either privately or publicly, to release all political prisoners.

Five: Allow the International Committee of the Red Cross to visit Cuban political prisons.

Six: Grant Cubans the same rights and opportunities foreigners enjoy in Cuba today.

Seven: The Congress could, as Senator Bill Nelson indicated at a recent Senate hearing, look into the need for additional U.S. funds to promote a democratic transition on the island. Why not review U.S. funding levels to promote democracy in other countries and bring the Cuba programs’ outlays to similar levels?

Eight: In line with statements by the President, the United States should enforce the law by closing loopholes which allow the flow of dollars to Castro which he uses for repression at home and anti-American mischief abroad. The Administration should fully enforce the Helms-Burton Law, particularly Title III which would permit U.S. courts to

hear suits brought against companies who traffic in stolen properties in Cuba and Title IV which denies visas to enter the U.S. to such traffickers.

Nine: The Administration should deploy a C-130 aircraft on the Florida Straits once a week to broadcast TV Marti in order to overcome “the information embargo that the Cuban government has imposed on its people.” The aircraft has been used as “an airborne transmission system” in Haiti, Panama, the Balkans, and recently on May 20th, a U.S. broadcast to Cuba.

Ten: The Administration should continue to warn Havana that a massive refugee outflow (which, as in the past, would be manipulated by Castro) would be considered “a hostile act.” This is important to prevent Castro’s blackmail of the U.S.

Eleven: The Administration should provide more information to the American people and the Congress about murderers of American police officers and other FBI fugitives who have been granted safe haven in Cuba.

Twelve: The Administration should also consider declassifying information about Havana’s capacity for research and development of biochemical weapons.

Thirteen: And finally, the United States could ask its friends and allies, many of whom have denounced repression in Cuba, to put in place pro-democracy programs on the island.

In addition, there is much that the American people and NGO’s (human rights groups, churches, labor unions, etc) could do- which is not the same as drinking *mojitos* in Cuba’s beaches, palavering with the bearded dictator and patronizing hotels, beaches, stores, restaurants and clinics set aside for foreigners where Cubans are not allowed.